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AUTHOR Simpson, Judith W.
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ABSTRACT

In post-medieval times, art became sacrosanct rather than special as it had been regarded in previous cultures. This notion still drives art education and prevents the inclusion of entire cultures in contemporary curricula in art education. The myths that any society lives with, whether religious, political, or economic, are embedded in that culture's artifacts. Cultures are comprised of messages that people send back and forth among themselves about the nature of reality. In ancient cultures visual messages, stylistic content, and themes that informed the artifacts were understood by all members of the society from which they were produced. The realization that visual forms allude to, or imply meaning beyond their literal association, leads to metaphorical interpretation. Visual metaphors are nonverbal, symbolic, and conceptual. The capability to decipher the complexity in layers of meaning and the ability to interpret symbols are distinctly human traits. Symbolic systems are mythic, metaphorical, and metaphysical in meaning. Art is a vehicle through which these meanings often are conveyed. Today there is a total disregard of the idea that anthropologically art must be viewed as an aspect of a culture, any culture in which it is produced. Broadening the definition of art validates the visual richness of expression found in preliterate societies and those formerly classified as "primitive," thus validating the existence of those students whose heritage is grounded in other than European culture. All aspects of cultures must be examined as the context in which art is produced. (DK)

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Myth Metaphors and Meaning

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By

Judith W. Simpson

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Since the Renaissance, art has been purported to be identifiable by a certain set of aesthetic criteria based on formalist principles or by an object centered, art for art's sake doctrine. That was the beginning of our the acceptance of a cultural myth that has persisted over time. Tolstoy, in 1896, wrestled with the idea that art is more than "beauty", that it represents "feelings" and is the language through which feelings are expressed, explicitly through objects "to which we attach special importance", (p. 49). Langer (1953) discusses art as an "expression of spontaneous feeling" representative of the "artist's state of mind". She goes on to say that those feelings result from the assimilation of societal customs, behaviors in the life of the artist, coupled with his inner vision. Dissanayake (1988), views art as a bio-behavioral necessity for man. It is an essential part of the social life of most cultures, a behavior that causes man to "make special"; that is as intrinsic to the human being as is the forming of verbal language or hunting for food. Each group or culture defines the act or object which is to be made "special" and passes on or transmits the information surrounding that object from generation to generation by other behavioral means: teaching, training, imititation, practice, reading, etc. In post Medieval times, art became sacrosanct instead of special. This notion still drives art education and prevents the inclusion of entire cultures from contemporary curricula.

Tribal art is part of every day experience, art and life are interchangeable. The distinction between art and custom is easily

understood by tribal societies and continues to confound ours ! "Preliterate people", Carpenter (1969) cannot rely upon written language for survival, therefore they develop a sensory, multiplicit thought capability that incorporates, rather than isolates, visual input. Their 'art' reflects this multisensory pattern as does their work. Both art and work, to them, mean "specialism".

The myths that any society lives with religious, political, economic are all embedded in that culture's artifacts. Cultures are comprised of messages people send back and forth among themselves about the "nature of reality". In ancient cultures, visual messages, stylistic content, themes that informed the artifacts, all were understood by all members of the society from which they were produced. The visual language was of an animistic nature (objects of nature inhabited by spirits, by gods). Totemic images of hawks and sea creatures, for example, did not represent the creatures, but were spiritual homes, the ancestral portraits of the societies they served.

The realization that visual forms allude to, or imply meaning beyond their literal association, leads to metaphorical interpretation. Visual metaphors are nonverbal, symbolic and conceptual. For example, in the art of the Iatmul, New Guinea, huge carvings of birds representing male ancestors, serve as finial decorations on each of the double spires of the Men's house. As metaphors, the preditory nature of the sea-eagle and its fighting

spirit vindicated the Iatmul cultural custom of taking heads. The capability to decipher the complexity in layers of meaning and the ability to interpret symbols are distinctly human traits. Metaphor compresses meaning, goes beyond signs and symbols. Langer in her book, Problems of Art (1957) distinguishes between sign and symbols by classifying the former as not "invented by humans", whereas symbols are. In agreeing among themselves, groups, such as the Iatmul, determine symbols that allow one thing to stand for another, creating conventions that have "well established meaning within a culture". Meaning can be either literal or nonliteral. It is nonliteral meaning that is exemplified by metaphor. As Goodman, in 1978, and many others have viewed it, art is a metaphor through which new "ways of worldmaking" are possible; through which we shape, alter and transform ideas, things, information and dreams.

Anderson, (1989) sees art as a metaphor, as the "spirit container" of the human life force. As such he asserts, artforms are also "cultural containers representative of places and times"; the connection between one human being and another that "transcends space and time as expression of the spirit of human life". Myths, often accompanied by sounds, movements and rhythms of ritual, also transcend space and time. Symbolic systems are mythic, metaphorical and metaphysical in meaning. Art is a vehicle through which these meanings are often conveyed.

cultures from the "Fine Arts". Limiting our vision to such modes of criticism further enchances perpetuation of the cultural myth.

In Western societies, we have allowed that art documents history, displays man's reactions to his world, conveys romantic and allegorical notions, contains iconic imagery, but only as it relates to our linear perceptions. For example, we view Asian art, especially that of the Japanese print, as having profound influence on one of the most acclaimed periods in art history, that of Impressionism. We speak of Gaugain's experiences in Tahiti as if his adventure into "paradise" was a singular, personal event and use Noa Noa, his journal, as a vehicle to gain insight into the artist, not for the purposes of helping us to understand the Maori people, much less their "primitive" art forms. Nor, for that matter to accept the idea that their culture had its own definition of art and that it had nothing to do with what Gaugain produced there.

Making sense of the world around us, our interactions and experiences, compels us to make literal and metaphoric connections. At the root of this action is an act of symbolic transformation. Langer (1957) claims that this transformation takes place visually only after a person has a symbol vocabulary and the technical skills to manipulate art materials to make something. We often categorize primitive people as unsophisticated, incapable of complex thought, yet there are few more complex, cognitive tasks than making art objects. Making the symbolic transformation and translating that

The cultural myth, concerning how we view art, is persistent in today's curricula designs. We have totally disregarded the idea that anthropologically art must be viewed as an aspect of a culture, any culture in which it is produced. The arts, meaning, definition and purpose can only be understood within a context. The context is where art is made, by whom, for what use, what it meant to the people who made it. Anderson (1969), speaks of art as but one way of learning about a culture that should not be thought of as a phenomenon, but as a concept. If it is accepted that art is a concept, then it has no objective "referent" and one cannot say what it is or is not, but what is **meant** by the user of the term.

Educators have been struggling with this notion for decades, in Dewey's Art as Experience (1934), he speaks of experience as the foundation for art. Cultures have **varied** experiences, therefore their reason for making, as well as responding to art are different. If we think about the behaviorial aspects of man, we know that the innate desire to "mark make" has always been present. It is a distinctly human trait, a way of making known one's ideas as well as a kinaesthetic response. Rigid classifications take away the essential intent of an art product, and deny the basic unique and integral character of experience it contains. Criticism and perceptions that evolve from aesthetic standards set forth by those who judge what is and what is not art by such standards, prohibit meaning, cause confusion and limit definition so as to exclude entire

into material objects is one of man's special abilities. Anthropology disputes the myth that tribal societies are made up of simple minded individuals. Metaphorical connection making is evidenced in the art and actions of primitive societies.

Meaning making is a human condition. Finding a place in the scheme of things, dealing with his **ultimate concerns**, has always called for all man's resources to be exploited. Gregory Bateson (1972) views thought as an ecology comprised of multiple pathways in and outside the body. He asserts that "communication about relationships is encoded metaphorically". Analogic gestures are interpreted by use of prior association, metaphors form a basis of understanding information communicated. As a result, "levels of connectedness" occur. Art has to do with communicating metaphorically. Preliterate cultures rely on images that record and reflect their beliefs. But more than that, it does something more. It is a behavior, a way of making "special".

The attitude that art is elite, or better yet that the study of art is based on , as Ellen Dissanayake suggests, the "high art of dead white males" still pervades our thinking. This attitude of elitism keeps art education isolated from the general curriculum and prevents students from rationalizing its existence at all. By understanding art as a behavior, as a basic expression of man, as a means of communication-reflective of myths and loaded with metaphor, as a human need to "make special", art educators can bring relevant

meaning and visual connection-making to what is primarily a verbal educational system. In addition to the obvious value to learning this could have, broadening the definition of art validates the visual richness of expression found in preliterate societies and those formerly classified as "primitive". Thus, validating the existence of those present in our classrooms whose heritage is grounded in other than European cultures.

Support for the Cultural Pluralist point of view, the wholeness of socio-anthropologically based thinking about art, is found more and more as multi-culturalism focuses not on separate cultural views of man and his needs, but man in a more global context. All aspects of cultures, must be examined as the context in which art is produced. Not allowing ourselves to think this way is to continue to minimize the importance of our field and its syncretic meaning in education.

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